CONCLUSION

THE RHETORIC OF HUMOR

Earlier in this book, I observed the deficiencies of what has traditionally passed for comic theory – the explanation for "why we laugh" – as a tool for understanding what makes something funny. The subsequent chapters were intended to demonstrate the possibility of getting to grips with the substance of comic instances directly, that is, without the need for a guiding hypothesis. What I offered for each of the dozen or so sketches discussed in this book was a description of concrete details, and an articulation of how I understood these details, their implications and effects, to be working comedically, in synthesis with one another.

These accounts are unlikely to *persuade* anyone who is inclined to find one of these sketches unfunny that it is, in fact, funny. Hopefully someone who is already inclined to be amused by the material will gain from my account a more vivid sense of how it achieves this effect. However, I would tend to agree with Ted Cohen, in his book on jokes, when he observes that "you cannot show that [a] joke is an instance of something that *must* be acknowledged as funny, as you might show that an argument is an instance of valid reasoning" (1999: 29, italics added). Importantly, this does not mean that any attempt to say how humor works is merely "subjective", in the sense in which that word is sometimes used, to imply that any effort to interpret and evaluate art is redundant. A truly private joke, like a private language, is an impossibility. Humor is always shared. Each of the comic instances I have discussed in this book has been, and continues to be, found funny by many, many people, and it is wildly unlikely that they are all finding it funny in unique and idiosyncratic ways.

To call something funny is to say that it appeals to the funny bone. No doubt a particular kind of funny bone – but it is the nature of the "appeal" that matters here. The title

of this book calls it the art of humor, but it could otherwise be described as comic rhetoric. Notwithstanding his reductive definition of comedy (as the imitation of people who are "worse than the average" [as quoted in Morreall, 1986: 14]), Aristotle can be helpful for thinking through the different dimensions of the "appeal" of comedy. Thinking principally of political oratory, but offering categories that would pertain to a more expansive notion of rhetoric, Aristotle identified three modes of persuasive utterance:

> Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker [*ethos*]; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind [*pathos*]; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the speech itself [*logos*]. [2004: 7]

These three kinds of persuasion (*ethos, pathos, logos)* might be thought of as interlinked aspects of rhetorical address. As it applies to oratory, *ethos* would describe the appeal to conviction through personal trustworthiness and group affiliation. *Pathos* refers to the appeal to emotion, the effort to *move* listeners towards agreement (for instance, by heightening the poignancy of an anecdote, or by deploying language in a way that generates a persuasively satisfying rhythm, such as the "rule of three" when listing positive attributes). Finally, *logos* refers to the appeal to reason, the attempt to convince an audience of a point by presenting evidence in a certain way. Any instance of persuasive speech is likely to involve all three kinds of appeal.

Each of Aristotle's categories has, I argue here, an analogue in comic rhetoric. Distinguishing between them might help us from becoming fixated on a single aspect of comedy, and hopefully allow for a more holistic assessment of how something is funny. The

following sections will outline these three types or aspects of humorous appeal, recalling examples discussed previously in the book to serve as illustrations.

Logos

The *logos*, or logical-conceptual dimension, of a comic instance would be its animating ideas and contrasts, and how they are presented. A comedy sketch, for instance, is typically organized around a central comic conceit, as we found perhaps most vividly with the "thought experiment" type of sketch, where we are asked to entertain the logic and potential consequences of a fanciful idea, such as the suggestion that a gorilla might learn to speak English fluently ("Gerald the Gorilla", discussed in Chapter Three). The conceit may be gradually unveiled, as in the dawning upon us, in "Spiffington Manse" (Chapter Two), that there is too much furniture and too little space, or it may be given to us in a nutshell at the opening of the sketch for subsequent elaboration, as in the so-lucid-it's-dreamlike presentation of the premise of Buñuel's toilet party sequence (also Chapter Three). The internal logic of the scenario may be entirely available to us, and almost credible, as in the notion that James Brown might host a jacuzzi-based talk show, or the sense of it may remain deliberately obscure throughout, a challenge to rationalization, as in the idea of a discount store that offers a range of "prices" but no tangible products, in "Price War" (Chapter Five).

The *logos* of humor would also include the articulation and development of comic contrasts. "Swimming Pool" (Chapter One), for example, establishes and then complicates the contrast between self-gratification and self-effacement, egotism and altruism. At first Andy's glottal insistence – "I wanna geddin!", echoing cavernously around the municipal swimming baths – suggests an insatiable demand for instant pleasure, in contrast to the excessive procedural caution with which Lou consults the pool attendant. However, Lou's displayed commitment to his duties, as he prattles away, begins to smack of egotism;

conversely, Andy's devil-may-care pleasure-seeking soon becomes a race to conceal his true nature, to return to the wheelchair unnoticed, and thereby, as if altruistically, to allow Lou to continue in the caregiving role on which his identity is staked. The relationship between ostensible opposites is far more intricate and knotty, varied and unfolding, than the reductive notion of "incongruity" would suggest. The apparent simplicity of the action belies the density of comic suggestion that I have found, throughout this book, to be a crucial factor in what makes things funny.

Attending to the *logos* dimension of comedy means trying to order the "crush of thoughts" that humor invariably arouses. We encountered this when we considered (in the Introduction) the choice of a parrot, of all creatures, for the dead pet in the Monty Python sketch, along with the cluster of associations set off by the use of the word "deceased". We considered a different type of density in the performance of Jerry Lewis, setting off mental fireworks as he cycles madly through a succession of personae in the Boardroom ("idiot, demon, guru, cynic, tyrant, child, lunatic, ape", Chapter Four). We found parody particularly apt to engineer a kind of thought-crush, whether by asking us to apprehend up to three diegetic levels simultaneously, as in "Acorn Antiques", or by evoking a metafictional tussle between an "official" and "saboteur" narration, as in the "Stayin' Alive" sketch from *Airplane!* (both Chapter Two).

Ethos

Considering the *ethos* of an instance of comedy is to consider its invitation to a community of laughter. Part of this is to think of comedy as appealing to particular values that we are expected, perhaps even demanded, to share. Our toilet party sequence from *The Phantom of Liberty*, for example, addresses a viewer who finds the niceties of dinner parties tiresome and the veil cast over lower-bodily function absurd. "Awkward Conversation" asks

its audience to share its disdain for adolescent irony as a tool of social enforcement. The appeal to values is perhaps most striking in cases of satire, such as these, where comic pleasure is conditional on accepting the premise that a satirical target is fair game.

Beyond satire, however, to see comedy as involving an invitation to community is to recognize that humor is not just an intellectual construction and/or a means of emotional manipulation, but a form of human-to-human address. Ted Cohen, mentioned previously, brings out this dimension when he emphasizes the intimacy longed for, and realized, through jokes, which call upon a shared understanding, a shared way of seeing, or at least an invitation, in some way, to join hands. (Cohen: 1999). This is the key reason, beyond technical capacity, why robots seem destined forever to be incapable of humor, in the fullest sense of the word. However ingenious a verbal formulation might be concocted by artificial intelligence, it is difficult to see how a computer could manifest this sort of intimacy, unless perhaps we imagine these efforts to be reflecting, indirectly, the distributed wit of a human programmer. You can't exactly bond with a machine.

One almost universal convention of sketch comedy is testament to the importance of this dimension, namely that we are typically expected to recognize and perhaps even in some way identify with the main performers. The two are connected: identification *of* the troupe allows for identification *with* the troupe, with their way of seeing, their way of being, and with their sense of humor (whether madcap, deadpan, irreverent, dark or gregarious). Budgetary implications aside, it's possible to imagine a sketch show where each of the skits involves new and previously unknown actors. However, the effect would be quite unlike the usual situation, where between two and six identifiable members of a comic troupe play all the main characters, putting on different costumes, accents, perhaps even an array of silly walks, to perform their various roles. One challenge for makers of sketch comedy is that with each skit you need to begin again. However, having recognized performers means not having

to build quite from scratch. It allows, for one thing, a shorthand, as we saw in the casting of affable "nice guy" Michael Palin as the customer in "Argument Clinic" (Chapter Three). We found that sketch to culminate in the most overt acknowledgement of Monty Python as a troupe, when the gang reassembles to perform something like a stage bow, clasping one another by the shoulder under the premise of making arrests for crimes against comedy.

The recurrence of performers between sketches, calling upon our recognition of their different comic personae and temperaments, does not just give a sketch show, otherwise a patchwork of comic scenes, a tentative unity, although it *is* important that we feel are not simply dipping in and out of alien bits and pieces, as we might in the hypothetical case of a sketch show without a troupe. Sketch performers are considerably different to jobbing actors who happen to be acting a comedic role. With a troupe, we are asked to understand that the performers have a history and bond with one another, and that they are in some sense a creative community who offer their material for our appreciation. We are also often asked to imagine that they are *having fun* in this creative endeavor. This may be a fantasy, but it is a powerful one and important, in many cases, for comedians to convey, since it issues a virtual call for us to join them, to have fun *with* them, to enjoy the fun they are (ostensibly) having. It can be alienating, of course, even irritating, to see others having fun and to find oneself excluded – and, a different problem, it is maddening to intuit that the fun is being faked. These are issues that screen comedy needs perpetually to overcome.

There is, however, an acknowledgement in sketch comedy, more or less continuous, that roles are being *performed*. The main players in a comic troupe do not, on the whole, shrink into their characters but wear them ostentatiously. The script for the "Dead Parrot" sketch (discussed in the Introduction) may start by saying that a man walks into a pet shop, but that is misleading. *John Cleese* walks into a pet shop, with a John Cleese look on his face, and that's a quite different matter. Jordan Peele and Keegan Michael-Key immediately stand

out from the supporting cast around the table in “Awkward Conversation” (discussed in Chapter One) because they are wearing wigs just the wrong side of naturalistic. Unflattering as they are, the wigs are not exactly played for laughs; they acknowledge the playing of roles. We see that they know that *we* know they are putting it on. What’s more, Key and Peele give the distinct impression, especially as the sketch moves into the passage of reverse-field cutting, of playing to one another. The two leads almost seem to be trying to outdo each other with their gurning, turning the amplification dial up higher, as if trying to make one another laugh. There seems to be, for instance, a twinkle of suppressed mirth permitted expression in Jordan Peele’s face when his fellow performer forcefully seizes his head, gripping and twisting it with all the sadistic license the occasion provides. The thought naturally arises it’s a marvel he doesn’t crack up.

Indeed, although “character” in sketch comedy is never the intact vessel to which straight drama aspires, there are infrequent occasions when a performer “breaks character” by laughing – what the British call “corpsing”. We noted instances of this with Eddie Murphy in *Saturday Night Live*, and Victoria Wood in “Acorn Antiques”. It is an unspoken law of comedy that one can never give the impression of “corpsing” on purpose – which only goes to show its advantage, that it gives the audience a glimpse of the authentic performer behind the mask. Just as Aristotle’s *ethos* of oratory alludes to the “personal character” of the speaker, so the *ethos* of comedy is to offer the comedian as human, companionate, convivial.

Pathos

It is not sufficient, however, to consider only the realm of suggestions and ideas, and the invitation to community, when trying to articulate how something is funny. Just as Aristotle observed the importance, in oratory, of putting the audience in a certain frame of mind that is sympathetic to the argument being made, so comedy needs to put its audience in

a comic frame of mind. The *pathos*, or affective dimension, of comic rhetoric is the means by which it moves us towards laughter.

Music often plays a decisive role in the way sketches put us "in the mood". We saw this most exuberantly in the Morecambe and Wise sketch, where the upbeat, brassy tones of "The Stripper" helped turn a mundane morning ritual into a fiesta (Chapter Four). Elsewhere, we found a unique mood fostered by the choice of Harry Nilsson's "Without You" for the *Smack the Pony* singalong (Chapter Five). Its earnest strains do not exactly function as counterpoint, since we take them to reflect something of the despondency that the main character is trying, in her way, to convey, perhaps to shake. There is a tone of what we might call comic poignancy that comes not from the song itself, but from the contrast between its full-throated expression of emotion against this character's relative timidity, the self-defeating social reserve we witness in her self-conscious glances and aborted runs.

Beyond the direct use of music, we have noted throughout this book the musical aspects of comedy. It has become a truism to say that comedy is "all about timing". Of course, it is not *all* about timing, but the contribution of features such as pace, rhythm and phrasing can hardly be overstated. We observed, for instance, in the "Four Yorkshireman" sketch (Chapter Five), that the sense of compulsive, repetitious one-upmanship is carried through echoing of syntactical forms (e.g. "'Ouse? You were lucky..."; "Room? You were lucky..."), but that the rhythm of dialogue is carefully modulated to avoid monotony and to keep the development surprising.

Elsewhere, we found the comic energy of "Sir Digby Chicken-Caesar" (Chapter One), as our protagonist flees the scene of a crime, to derive from qualities of acceleration and simultaneity, and to disorienting shifts in viewpoint that fostered a tone of giddiness – for instance, the way the rattling tempo with which his inner monologue is delivered ("On a lonely planet spinning its way to damnation amid the fear and despair of a broken human

race...") is combined with the injection of energy provided by a whirling body-mount camera. Like a funfair ride, the effect is visceral, not merely intellectual.

Susanne K. Langer is a rare theorist who has gestured towards this aspect of comedy. Langer finds comedy uniquely poised to embody and elicit a "a surge of vital feeling" (1977: 340). What distinguishes comedy from other artistic forms, for her, is its embodiment of a "rhythm" of what she calls "sheer vitality" (332). Langer finds comedy speaking to a deep biological instinct, common to all organic matter, for self-preservation and self-restoration. If that suggestion sounds a touch New Age and far-fetched (and it could be reductive in its own way if that was *all* comedy was taken to be), we can readily discern something like this in the way "Sir Digby", for instance, is structured episodically as a series of scrapes, each one culminating in a resplendent burst of *The Devil's Gallop* as Sir Digby flees the scene, a perversely exuberant flight from responsibility. This is Langer's "comic rhythm", with its alternation between "upset and recovery" (331). We found a related expression of buoyancy, of bouncing back, in the succession of "boomerang gags" that pervaded the disco sequence in *Airplane!* (Chapter Two). What we found important here was the *feeling* of the irrepressible.

Recalling Langer's notion of a "surge", we had occasion, as well, in this book to observe the frequency with which comedy manifests precipitous accumulation, a feeling of acceleration. The comic surge may take the form of a kind of sensory pile-on, as in the frenetic montage and eventual cosmic explosion with which "Price War" culminates (Chapter Five), or a sudden lurch, such as the darting dance movement of Captain Billing-Smythe and Daisy as they plough through the remaining house ornaments in "Spiffington Manse" (Chapter Two). The sensation, in this case, is not relief but exhilaration. Richard Dyer's explanation of the appeal of musicals, and of entertainment more widely, is that they offer a sense of "what utopia would feel like" (2002: 20, my italics). For Dyer, the dominant feelings elicited by entertainment, which he categorizes as energy, abundance, intensity, transparency

and community, respond and offer a counterweight to real-world problems of exhaustion, scarcity, dreariness, manipulation and fragmentation. Applied to comedy as a mode of entertainment, Dyer's functional hypothesis could end up being a socially-oriented version of the relief theory of humor. Nonetheless, it is worth considering, as part of what I am calling humor's *pathos*, how comedy works to engineer "utopian feeling". We found something like this offered by the Monks sketch from *Big Train* (discussed in the Introduction), with Brother Mark's absurdly forgiving reaction to the hoax, and in the "Breakfast" sketch, again (Chapter Four), with its utopian synthesis of the domestic, the theatrical and the erotic, as an antidote to the tolls of bourgeois marriage.

Accounting for the *pathos* of humor, especially, requires close and vivid evocation of how a comic instance unfolds, moment by moment. It is this dimension, accordingly, that has proved elusive for critics and theorists who crave a shortcut into grasping what makes us laugh. There is no essence of humor, and it can certainly not be found in the logic, structure or values extracted from a set of comic specimens. The humor of comedy emerges from the way performers move, how they deliver their lines, how they are lit and framed and edited, how they are clothed and how the set is dressed – and so on, and so forth. These aspects don't all compel laughter, but they help inspire it, generating an atmosphere conducive to mirth.

Comedy in Three Dimensions

The three "dimensions" summarized above are interlinked aspects of comic rhetoric. My hope is that by highlighting that all three aspects are operative in humor, this should at least deter the kind of reductive account that has tended to pass for comic analysis. Any account has to end somewhere, has to be non-exhaustive, but perhaps, used as a rough checklist, these "three dimensions" might at least urge analysts not to draw a line too hastily, and not to fixate on a single dimension (say, the logic or structure of comedy, without

considering how it unfolds and how it addresses its audience). There is no reason, on the other hand, to assume that each of these aspects will carry equal weight in any given instance. There might be more to say about one and less about the others. Equally, it offers no way to predict the channels by which the *ethos, logos* and *pathos* of a comic instance will be realized. The onus remains on the analyst to trust her or his experience, to reflect honestly upon it, to observe closely and carefully, and to strive to find the apposite words to convey the humor of the work.

What I want to suggest here, and what I ultimately hope to have shown in this book, is, firstly, that humor is not the disposable phenomenon that it is often assumed to be and, secondly, that it is capable of being analyzed in a spirit that does justice to it. At some points in this book, including this concluding chapter, I have had occasion to return to instances that I have discussed before, finding more to say. The very possibility of this suggests that accomplished works of humor, like other works of art, contain many facets, that they are capable of withstanding, indeed may reward, multiple returns and sustained consideration. This is another reason for thinking of comic rhetoric as having dimensions: the point being that humor is substantial, not thin, nor throwaway, even if it sometimes is constructed to seem offhand and casual. Articulating the satisfactions that comedy affords, and identifying how these have been attained, is for this reason quite a challenge. Trying to say how something is funny might still strike some as a peculiar thing to want to do. But it seems to me an imperative if we want to understand the artistry of comedy, and the specificity of humor as a phenomenon, its place in our culture, and in our lives.